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TRILBY.[1]

The sale of a hundred thousand copies of a book in four months is, as far as we know, unprecedented in the annals of English literature. The name of the work which has achieved this phenomenal success is an old one. Charles Nodier's "Trilby, or the Fay of Argyle," published a little more than seventy years ago, attained considerable popularity in its day, and now ranks as a French classic. No less an authority than Sainte-Beuve has called attention to the beauty of its style, and the high praise which he bestows on it ought to induce some of those who have enjoyed its namesake to read this exquisite but little known fairy-story which describes with all the witchery of dainty fancy and ail the charm of haunting melody the love of the fay Trilby for the mortal Jeannie. Perhaps one of the principal reasons why Mr.DuMaurier's "Trilby" has been read so widely and with such enthusiastic admiration is to be found in its unconventionality of manner, which makes it especially welcome to readers who have begun to tire of the various unpalatable forms of realism and to thirst for something fresher than a recrudescence of the historical romance. To such readers a second work from the author of "Peter Ibbetson" is as welcome as a black tulip to the florist or a new theory of the absolute to the metaphysician. The mingled gaiety and pathos of Bohemian art-life have seldom been depicted with so much graceful zest, delicate pleasantry and admirable local color. The illustrations, which are excellent, naturally suggest comparison with another writer whose sketches add not a little to his descriptions of men and things, the author of "Vanity Fair." The glint and glamour of style, the moralizing over old things loved,

[1] "Trilby," a novel by George DuMaurier, author of "Peter Ibbetson," with illustrations by the author; New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1894.

which enters into the theme like a minor strain in music, the holding up of faults and foibles to the keen and searching, yet kindly, sunlight which penetrates every cranny, the taking of the reader into the author's confidence, the quiet, humorous raising of the curtain in order that the audience may see behind the scenes and know how the puppets are worked,— these are marked points of resemblance, but in the last feature Mr. DuMaurier has shrunk from fully imitating his great predecessor, and so has missed the last and most poignant element of tragedy. But "Vanity Fair" does not leave on the mind the impression that it is a story of people who actually lived and of things that actually happened, as much of "Trilby" does; the characters that hate or pity are but dreams clothed upon by a master-mind, the facts of human nature made concrete, elusive and hollow as life itself, and therefore in the last analysis infinitely natural and true.

The lesson that "Trilby" teaches is that which underlies all that Thackeray has written, that at bottom there is something noble and grand in human nature despite its weakness and meanness, that sinful, struggling creatures still bear the impress of divinity, that life with all its discords has strains of exquisite harmony and holds within itself a grandeur of evolution like that of an old Greek tragedy. All this is taught in "Trilby" with much of Thackeray's incisive humor and consummate art, but not with Thackeray's depth of thought and grasp of the eternal truths of human nature. The main feature of the story is "Trilby" herself; "her confounded Trilbyness," as the Laird calls it, pervades and dominates the book like the red of the leaves in an autumn landscape. The conception is one out of which the author might have made a great creation like "Tess of the D'Urbervilles," although not so great: but this he has failed to do, and the reason of his failure will appear presently. Many of the other characters are pictured with almost faultless art, Svengali, Gecke, Mr. Bagot, little Jeannot,—a most pathetic figure,— the Greek

whose name was too beautiful to be vulgarized by every day use, Durien the sculptor, Dodor and Zouzou, the latter of whom is as captivating as D'Artagnan or Sam Weller. More prominent than any of these, and drawn with more fullness of detail but less skill, is Little Billee. The world has a happy-go-lucky way of judging a man, not by what he is, but by what he does,— an old-fashioned, inaccurate rule-of-thumb which has been crystallized into the saying, "By their fruits ye shall know them." Judged by his fruits Little Billee is weak in body and character, though strong in brain with the strength of genius. Our best ideas of him are got from the illustrations and not from the story, and, in spite of his narrowness, which some critics have miscalled priggishness, and his lack of fibre and stamina, we find him thoroughly lovable. On the whole it may be said of all the characters that they are well drawn and seem like people whom we have met or might meet in Paris or London, to say which is to give the book high praise.

But while the skill in character drawing and the mingled kindliness, pathos, and penetration of "Trilby" make it comparable in some respects to Thackeray's immortal novels and occasionally suggest the manner of that old Roman singer whom Thackeray loved, Horace, so supremely in touch with humanity that every scene hangs before his readers like a clear picture in sunny air, yet its defects are grave and such as to prevent it from taking rank among the great works of English fiction. Minor shortcomings we will not dwell on, for even the greatest novels are full of faults, but it can hardly be considered hypercritical to note the deplorable commonness of much of the material out of which the story is made. The old-time trick of lauding a woman who has all the virtues but virtue,— the very word-play is a stale quotation — the old comparison between Bohemia and Philistia, the old familiar passages on the triumph of art, the mysterious disappearance, the sudden death from heart-disease,— here are all the ingredients of the ordinary fifth-rate novel except the murder and the de-

tective. The plot, moreover, is decidedly rambling, and time and space are disregarded with charming candor. Perhaps we cannot expect anything else in latter-day fiction, but is there any excuse for ignoring the unities of art? We are forced to ask the question, ought a book to end at its climax? And is the climax of this book the scene at the Hall of the Bashibazoucks in Paris or the concert at Drury Lane or the death of Trilby? Or are there several climaxes, and is the meeting with Gecko in Paris twenty years after, where an explanation is furnished which everybody knew before, a climax or an anti-climax?

But the use of outworn devices and failure to marshall incidents are, after all, points of minor importance. The serious defect of "Trilby" is that for the romance of subtle psychological analysis which charms us in the first half of the book, Mr. DuMaurier has substituted in the second half the creaking machinery of modern mesmerism. Mesmerism, a new factor in science, is a threadbare thing in story-writing,— a sort of *deus ex machinâ* out-at-elbows who savors of the stage-carpenter, and "Trilby" uses much mesmerism, besides introducing a very accurately described case of self-induced hypnosis. It is the presence of this element that makes the book unnatural and untrue to life. No one now-a-days would be so foolish as to deny the remarkable results of hypnotic power, and Svengali's ability to produce music from Trilby's unmusical soul might be paralled by actual occurrences, although the extent to which our author carries it may well "give us pause." But the unnatural can no more be made the subject-matter of a great work of fiction than the supernatural. The novel must depict life in accordance with the external laws of artistic truth and artistic charm. Paradoxical as it may seem, truth is the fundamental requisite of good fiction, the supreme virtue, the merit on which all other merits depend.

The only novels that have stood the test of time are those that are true to life, for fiction is not falsehood, it is transfiguration of life in the light of the imagination. Truth of

life as a whole, not truth of separate facts, must be the novelist's aim; his theme is life as we know it, in the true proportion of its natural relations, not a fancy picture made up of subjects or objects taken from life. The Witch of Endor, Benvenuto Cellini in the Colosseum, Trilby under the mesmeric influence of Svengali, are not the characters out of which great fiction is made. Important and valuable as the phenomena of mesmerism are to the psychologist, they lie too far out of the common experience of humanity to form a prime ingredient of a great novel. It is because few authors of to-day are better qualified than Mr. DuMaurier to delineate life that we regret that he should have wandered out of the theatre of human struggles and human frivolities into the devious by-paths of hypnotic manifestation. How much more could he have made of Trilby had he eliminated this element of the unnatural! That she should die with Svengali's name on her lips outrages all our better feelings. The real Trilby in her last hour would have gone back to the days of her childhood, as Falstaff babbled of green fields.

Truth of matter and truth of manner are both necessary for the production of a great work of art. Truth of manner Mr. DeMaurier possesses in a high degree, though for the best examples of it we must go to his earlier work, "Peter Ibbetson":

> "Oh that I could hum or whistle an old Paris smell!"
>
> "Sometimes during these readings the sleeping Médor would wag his three inches of tail, and utter soft whimperings of welcome in his dream; and she would say—"C'est le Prince Charmant qui lui dit, 'Médor, donne la patte.'" . . . Or our old tom-cat would rise from his slumbers with his tail up, and rub an imaginary skirt; and it was—"Regarde Mistigris! La fée Tarapatapoum est en train de lui frotter les oreilles."

But truth of matter cannot be predicated of either of Mr. DuMaurier's books taken as a whole. Peter Ibbetson's dreams are as abnormal as the singing of the mesmerized Trilby, and the abnormal is not the province of fiction. Mesmerism, as much a fact as hysteria, is as little suited to the purposes of art. It is because most of life is more than

truths of philosophy and science that "Robinson Crusoe" is greater than "The Mill on the Floss", and "Pendennis" greater than "Trilby."

Not that fiction excludes psychology. Every novelist is a psychologist, who depicts mental phenomena and shows their relation and interdependence; but to take some specific department of psychological science and make it the groundwork of a story is to put a part for the whole and distort the fair unity of truth. It is this that makes "The Marble Faun" inferior to "Eugenie Grandet" and puts "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" in an immeasurably lower category than the novels of Fielding. Still graver is the offence against the canons of the art of fiction when the department of science which furnishes the *motif* of a book is fraudful, chaotic, disordered, and inharmonious. One cannot read the latter half of "Trilby" with much relish when one sees pasted all over it the prospectus of The Society for Psychical Research. Sidgwick and Lodge, James and Podmore, and the ghosts of Gurney and Stainton-Moses speak to us here through the mediumship of Mr. DuMaurier, and, though we admire the sagacity that marks their choice of so eloquent an expounder, we cannot congratulate our author on the readiness which he shows to become the passive recipient of their hypnotic suggestions.

We have no objection to people busying themselves, if they have nothing better to do, with the strange products that lie on the border-land of science and superstition, from faith-cures up to Mahotmas, but when a man of genius like Mr. DuMaurier degrades his art into a vehicle for hypnotism, we are unpleasantly reminded of Florence Marryatt and Marie Corelli and the host of other dabblers in electro-biological moonshine. The Beautiful Gate of the Temple of Fiction cannot be rebuilt out of the mist-columns of *fin de siècle* mesmerism. He who is foolhardy enough to wander, uncalled by duty, through the tangled jungle of theological controversy can blame no one but himself when he is smitten by "the privy paw" of

Professor Huxley, but that the inoffensive citizen who basks in the sunlight of fiction, in the hope to gild thereby "some reaches of his storm-vexed stream of life," should be sandbagged in the name of science is a grievance in the republic of letters that calls for the meeting out of artistic justice.

JOHN FEARNLEY.